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Liam Gillick, "Joan Jonas meets Liam Gillick," *ArtReview*, March 14, 2018

ArtReview



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Joan Jonas meets Liam Gillick



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below: *Reincarnation*, 2010/2012/2013, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Photo: Thomas Müller. © the artist/ Rights Society, New York / DACS, London. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome

above: *Mirror Piece*, 1969, performance. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome

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Organic Howey's Vertical Roll, 1972-73, multimedia performance. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome

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They Come to Us without a Word (Mirrors), 2015
(installation view, us Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale).
Photo: Moira Ricci. Courtesy the artist

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Some subjects that Jonas Jonas has touched on over her 50-year career (in no particular order): nature, her dog, animism, Japanese Noh theatre, the moon and the sun, insects, masks (metaphorical and literal), ghosts, landscape, Hopi mythology, the female body, the female artist, the nature of presence versus representation, memory, her home in Cape Breton. Yet the artist never addressed this diverse range of interests directly. Instead they are filtered and reflected back and forth through the wide-ranging media she deploys, not least performance, drawing, film, video, sculpture and sound, often together in a single cacophonous installation. In *Mirage*, from 1976, the artist chalk-draws an image of the sun. She partially rubs it out, transforming the simple composition into a moon. The artist performs the same actions live, the blackboards left in the gallery in which the film of the action is installed. Over time Jonas has moulded a visual language that is shamanic, mystical and ecologically aware in equal measure. Her US Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, titled *They Come to Us without a Word*, took inspiration from the novels of Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness and other literary sources similarly concerned with the spiritual aspects of nature. A survey of her work is set to open at Tate Modern, London, and her influence on younger generations is acknowledged in her appointment as a mentor in the Rolex protégé programme. Jonas spoke with fellow artist Liam Gillick in New York, who also took her portrait for the cover of this issue.

LIAM GILICK *What's difficult for some people to understand with your work is "What is a performance?" and "What is an installation?" In recent works you sometimes stand to the side of the stage manipulating objects. So it's a strange role: like a performer one step removed. Does it matter that people might not know the difference between a performance or installation? Maybe a performance has to have you in it, or maybe it doesn't?*

JOAN JONAS So far it has. One of the difficulties in talking about my work is that I am referred to as a performance artist, and I don't think it's the right descriptive term. Because nobody understands what a performance is today. There are so many definitions out there that performance has become a meaningless word in relation to what I do and what other people do.

LG *Well, we are supposed to think it is radical. We are supposed to think it is good – that's the recent idea – that performance is inherently good. Good and radical.*

JJ I think of a performance as being live, with the performer appearing live in front of an audience. It is one of the underlying structures and mediums that I work with in combination with technology and handmade things.

For instance, when I am standing to the side in those performances and the video projection is dominating the space while I am working with the image on the table with a live camera, what I am really doing is manipulating and making images, and in a way I am performing with my hands. So, it is a performance because I am there, live on the stage. I came out of a sculptural background.

LG *You mean in terms of being in a studio and thinking, "How am I going to make something", rather than starting from a theoretical position?*

JJ Yes. I went to art school but I also studied art history. So, my concerns and references have been painting, film, writing, poetry, prose, literature. So, for me, when I was drawn to make live performances – inexplicably – I just couldn't resist it because I could invent three-dimensional situations using all the different mediums: music, movement, visual elements, drawing...

“When the video projection is dominating the space while I am working with the image on the table with a live camera, what I am really doing is manipulating and making images, and in a way I am performing with my hands”

LG *There have certainly been moments in contemporary art history where the idea was to get rid of stuff.*

JJ I am not a minimalist. When I started it was the time of Minimalism, and I had many friends who were minimalist sculptors and composers, and Minimalism was the language that interested me, and I was inspired by it and I learned a lot from it, but I think the structure was what I was able to observe and be interested in – how do you structure something?

LG *Yes, there is definitely something in the work like that. It's like an invisible structural field – something to do with timing. And certain forms – like your use of cones and hoops, and maybe just the edge of the screen. There is something contained. There is some kind of geometric presence.*

JJ Oh definitely, it has to be form: I really consider how something is formed, how something is structured. In Minimalism, even when I saw my first Sol LeWitt show at the Jewish Museum, I always saw a lot. I imagined a lot of content and elements beyond these cube structures.

LG *I remember seeing Robert Morris's mirrored cubes as a child. And I remember the main thing that struck me – apart from the fact that there were these 'special' and 'extra' cubes in a gallery – was the view of people's legs reflected in them. So, when you use so many points of reference and different elements in your work, can't you tell if that gives a certain freedom or if it hides things.*

JJ Some people would think it's about hiding things, but it's not at all. When I started doing my video performances – with the *Organic Honey* series (1972) – the first person to propose me for review was Jonas Mekas, because he came and he understood it, because it was like film in a way. Like a live film with video projections, and my performance was in relation to the technology of the video. So, I would say also that what bothers me about being called a performance artist as the main description is that in parallel I have always worked with video and other mediums. It is all a part of my language.

LG *It's not just the framing or the sources that affect me but this idea that you are editing in real time. This act of editing interests me. It's not just the framing of an idea but the chopping and cutting, breaking and interrupting.*

JJ At the same time that I was looking at contemporary work and studying art history I was looking at film – going to Anthology Film Archives (in New York) and a lot of places that don't exist any more that were showing film in the 1960s and 70s. So, the structure of film was a major part of my thinking and when I was first making performances and working with time I thought of film and the idea of the cut and the edit. It would be disturbing to an audience that you would suddenly have a cut. Although film people were not at all disturbed, I would say.

LG *So, you were embodying a procedure that is partly structural and changes the experience as much as the effect of a large projection might change the mood?*

JJ It's like Eisenstein – who is a major influence on many people, of course – putting one thing next to another and creating a language that way, and it is also related to Surrealism and juxtaposing disparate ideas, objects and images.

LG *Coming back to this editing-in-real-time idea. Even though you can be seen sometimes – especially when you are standing to the side manipulating objects for a camera and everything seems very lucid and clear – as a viewer, one still gets transported. The viewer doesn't lose engagement with the event, even though you are clearly standing there making these things happen: moving around marbles and other objects, under a small camera, which are then overlaid on the screen. If anything, this process heightens a ritualistic aspect of the work. Are you thinking in terms of timing and do you change timings between one performance and another?*

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They Come to Us without a Word II, 2015, performance at Teatro Piccolo
Arsenale, Venice. Photo: Moira Ricci. © the artist / Artists
Rights Society, New York / DACS, London

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JJ I think of those things of course, and those things can subtly vary from one performance to another of the same piece. But in terms of relating things to ritual, my objects don't have a symbolic meaning, whereas they do in spiritual religions. I was always interested in magic shows growing up as a child, so when I first started working, I did think slightly in terms of magic shows. But I was interested in revealing the process. There was a Process show at the Whitney and I really identified with that, because at the time I thought of my work as revealing the process as well: revealing all the illusions. I am showing you how I make it. Right from the very beginning that was part of my desire.

LG *Misdirection is part of being a magician.*

JJ That's probably true in my work: there are several things going on at the same time, so you miss things. So, everybody has a slightly different perception.

LG *When I was a kid we had a big mirror above the fireplace and I used to hang upside down and look, not at myself, but at this doubled world that was upside down, and I would look to the sides to see if I could see anyone there who wasn't in our world but existed only in this parallel universe. I never looked directly in the mirror but used a mirror as a way of seeing new worlds. People always write about your use of mirrors. I am not sure that people see a reflection in those mirrors. Maybe they see something else?*

JJ They have a lot of references, you know. But when I was making those mirror pieces I didn't see individual reflections; I saw how they changed the space. They altered the perception of the whole space – that's what really interested me when I was working with those. So, it would be about looking until things changed in some way. I don't know if the audience sees that. Maybe they do. And then the other thing that interested me is how people are so uneasy about people watching them as they view their own reflection: having other people see that they see themselves.

LG *Meaning that if you are sitting side by side in the audience you might be able to see yourself and who is sitting next to you, in front or behind you.*

JJ What you said about hanging upside down was great. Kind of like a bat.

LG *Yes. And it was important that I was interested not just in reflection but inversion, and I use that still in work: the phrase reflected and inverted. I haven't been able to escape from that feeling: seeing the world in a mirror I could accept more easily a world that was upside down. Sometimes in your work the sense of up and down and back to front is suspended for a bit. The mirrors and projections play with space and perception. When you are in a performance are you "lost"?*

JJ When I am performing – yes – hopefully. But not when I am rehearsing. When I am performing the time just goes – like that. That's performance.

LG *But your sense of time is not dependent on the audience, because it is not theatre?*

JJ No, but I can feel the audience concentrating. I have done bad performances where you can feel the audience resetting to that as well. But there is a reference to theatre.

LG *That comes to the question of drawing. When you were thinking about the question of art – in the beginning – you were drawing?*

JJ I was drawing. I had this idea that I had to 'learn how to draw'.

LG *Did anyone teach you how to draw?*

JJ I had one artist, [the sculptor] Harold Tovish, in Boston who taught me. He just told me to follow the contour. That was very good discipline.

“My objects don't have a symbolic meaning, whereas they do in spiritual religions. I was always interested in magic shows as a child, so when I first started working, I did think slightly in terms of magic shows. But I was interested in revealing the process”

LG *What a great piece of advice.*

JJ So that was the only person who taught me anything about drawing – the rest was trial and error. For me that was the one discipline I brought with me from the sculptural – although I think of my work in terms of three dimensionality in relation to sculpture, in relation to space. But with every piece I do, I try and imagine another way to make a drawing – in relation to the sculpture and the content.

LG *In the end you had three types of drawing at the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015 – in terms of almost pure drawing: the fish, the Rorschach bees and then the kites, which were not made by you but you painted them and put images on them. I can't tell if they are a starting point or an endpoint.*

JJ I am just dedicated to experimenting with and making drawings as a part of my work because it is another part of what I am trying to say – in some way. I don't know how you perceive it, but I don't want to just make video and performances – I like to have a physical

moment which is making something on a page, and I like the idea of juxtaposing this to technology.

LG *You said in an interview with Ingrid Schaffner that when you were making the fish drawings you kept your eyes on old Japanese illustrations of fish – you were not looking at your own drawing. You were communicating with another person's work.*

JJ That comes from the very beginning – drawing without looking. Another way of making a drawing in relation to the monitor. I would look at a monitor and only look at the drawing I was making on a monitor. I called it drawing without looking. And what interests me about drawing in performance is that the results are so surprising. Something else comes out.

LG *A difficult thing to imagine when you are young is reanimation – metaphysically and literally bringing things back. Going back to older material and literally bringing it back to life. Giving it a new context. Tell me about reanimation in relation to the Tate exhibition. How do you approach a show like that? There is a lot of expectation.*

JJ I have done several shows like this – survey shows. I make big models. I choose the works that are most interesting and significant for me and I go from there. And the curators have their ideas – which gives another perspective. I am much more open to that now than I used to be. This show comes out of a process I have been involved in since the 70s.

LG *So, this survey show at Tate is not contradictory to your working method – it actually supports it.*

JJ Well, I have always considered my setups for performances as stage sets, and in 1976 I had a show at the ICA in Philadelphia titled *Stage Sets* in which the central work was composed of objects and structures from earlier works in a formal arrangement. This way became more fully developed in 1994 [for a mid-career survey exhibition] at the Stedelijk Museum, and since then I have questioned 'what is installation?'. The audience sitting and watching my performance: that's one point of view. The audience walking through in relation to installation: there are many points of view. I think in terms of rooms. So, what am I doing? For Tate we chose several larger installations. *Reanimation* [2010/2012/2013] will be in one of the tanks and the other tank will only be available for the first ten days for the live performances, so in that way this is the first show that has included live performances. I have reintroduced my *Mirror Piece* [1969] just by itself several times and in this case we are developing the *Mirror Piece* indoors while the outdoor works will be performed on the banks of the Thames at low tide. We have to adjust the different elements to this new space. I don't know how that will work.

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Like the London Filmmakers Project – you felt they were living radicality rather than referring to it.

JJ There were always these different video groups in New York – more political than the artworld. I knew these people, but I was in the artworld. I was interested in Bruce Nauman and so on.

LG *There is no vanity in your work. I was thinking the other day – could I explain clearly what Joan looks like just from looking at old stills from videos and performances? And it's quite a challenge. You are not merely asserting you exist by taking a photo of yourself. You become interleaved with stories and narratives and time. So many artists spend so much time asserting that they exist, but you have spent many years trying to dissolve.*

JJ The radical thing about the Portapak was that you could sit in your studio and make things and see it right away. And see yourself. That was a radical moment, and there hasn't been one like it since, except in relation to the Internet. People now ask me – did you know you were anticipating the selfie – and of course not, and no, I don't think I was.

LG *I want to ask you about your relationship with galleries. The work you were showing looked quite radical even for Leo Castelli's programme in the early 1970s. Looking back at photos, it is hard to tell where the work starts and ends. It is not the same as the conceptual work he was showing at the time.*

JJ I remember when Vito [Acconci] first started performing at Castelli, I went there with people

who were slightly horrified. I liked it because I could see what he was trying to do. But for others it was very difficult.

LG *It is easy to forget now that performance was an implicit challenge.*

JJ Castelli had been showing videos and collecting them, and there was a whole section in the back of the gallery. There were different periods for me. All of a sudden, the cameras got too expensive in the 1980s. Then I started editing at night in studios with brilliant editors, and you overdid it in a way. But then in the 1990s the cameras got smaller, so in the 1990s things became much more like documentary. So you started carrying cameras around with you for the first time. The Portapak you didn't carry around – it was too heavy.

LG *Hence the classic Sony name – Portapak. Directly contradicting its potential.*

JJ By the 1990s you started recording the things around you and picking up documentary footage, and that's another kind of content that ensets into the work.

LG *Performance and installation is resistant to the standard flow of a gallery. But you have always been in the artworld.*

JJ I was always interested to be in that discussion.

*ritu and Jacqui page
They Came in Us without a Word, 2015,
production stills. Courtesy the artist.*

LG *Were there times when you felt it was difficult? It's easy to doubt yourself at some point.*

JJ At the beginning, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I had the support of all these people around me who were in the scene. I never felt alone – also the worlds of dance and video were dominated by women. And then in the 1980s I did feel... I think it was mistaken, but I thought I shouldn't show in galleries, so I actually avoided galleries for a while. But I kept working and kept showing, but not in the same way. And in the 1990s I did feel I had to kind of fight my way back. But I always had the support of other artists.

LG *Is there anything that is getting left out of the current discussion about your work? Are there any productive misunderstandings?*

JJ The focus is sometimes on the pioneer – the pioneer performance artist. What does the word pioneer mean? As I said before – narrowing it down to the word performance creates a big misunderstanding. It creates nothing, in a way. It says it is all performance, and with the installations you are just seeing debris from a performance. I make a big distinction between performance debris, installation and what a pioneer might be today. ar

Joan Jonas is on view at Tate Modern, 14 March – 5 August, with performances by Jonas included in the BMW Tate Live Exhibition; the Tate Modern exhibition will then travel to Haus der Kunst, Munich, 9 November – 5 March

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LG *I used to live on the river about a mile downstream from there. Low tide is surprising. There's a beach.*

JJ But it's very different from the locations where those works were first performed. I am also doing a piece called *Minge* [1976], which is a solo. When I re-perform these pieces I don't believe you could ever reproduce what had happened originally. So, they have to be tweaked. And then there's my age, of course, and what are people looking at? They are saying, "What's that older woman doing?" Things like that. But Jason Moran and I are performing an improvised duet. I enjoy this work.

LG *The Tate is still the Tate. It's still a museum. They don't always do big complicated installations. They don't always do performances on the river. Like all museums they worry a lot about the public. So how do you deal with this question of interpretation and mediation? Do you get involved?*

JJ As you know, my work cannot be experienced well in photographs and writings. It's impossible. So, I am used to the fact that some people get it and some people don't. What can I do? I don't have any control over that. If I worried about that, I would get even less sleep than I already do. I try my best to communicate my ideas, my vision to the audience.

LG *I like to be involved in the mediation of the work. Sometimes I want more and sometimes less – it depends. Since 1994 there have been several moments or big steps in the work, so you must be used to these limits or possibilities.*

JJ When I did the Stedelijk show in 1994, people I knew in Amsterdam said, "You are missing from this, you know". But that's disappeared – I am much more present.

LG *I want to ask about working in an ensemble. You basically work alone?*

JJ I am the director and the conceiver. And right from the beginning I did all the camerawork – except for a couple of times when I have hired a camera team. For example, in Venice I hired camera people because I couldn't do it, and direct it, and film the whole thing myself. Also, the video backgrounds with children performing in them had to be recorded by professionals with better cameras. You could say I try and oversee everything, I work with a video editor because I don't want to learn that technology any more – it has become too complicated for me.

LG *It's a rabbit hole. Because once you get into it, you look for increasingly easy techniques. Modern video editing 'facilitates'. You see too much information – in a timeline.*

JJ I work with the editor. I sit there. I have an assistant who is a really good editor who I trust.

LG *That comes around to the question of timing – the time of the performance. Of course, I always think that you are a contradiction that disproves a rule. We are told that technology is something that works increasingly fast and makes everything shallow and empty, and even alienating, yet you have always been an early adopter of certain technologies, and this doesn't seem to have an entirely negative effect. Tiny cameras now, Perisopaks*

early on. I am trying to move away from talking about mirrors and water and shamanic activity and stories from Iceland.

JJ None of those things would be interesting without the structure and relation – not just to technology – but a way of visualising things. So, it's not just the story – it's the way the story is told. It's the same with everything.

LG *I have watched a lot of early videowork by American artists, sometimes on the original Sony open reels of tape, and you get the sense that they are thinking, "What am I going to do with this video camera?" and as a result they are almost always in the work themselves. They would maybe set it up in the studio and think, "Ox, now I am going to sing a song". Now technology has become more discrete. Do you see a piece of technology and think – I could really do something with that – or do you have an idea and try and find the right kit?*

JJ I think both of those things. In a way I am quite an old-fashioned video artist – I am not working on the Internet. I just saw an early film of John [Baldessari] where he is painting himself into the corner of a room.

LG *At art school in the early 1980s we had amazing Panasonic cameras that were really sophisticated. And I found the spaces where you could use these cameras were outside the normal time of the studio tradition. Time was different. The AV people or the people into video weren't into the traditional artist's studio. And they were often hybrid people – they studied something else or had been filming modern dance or music videos. They often had a different politics.*